

# INTER-PERSONAL RELATIONSHIP

## *A Biblical Perspective*

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### **Introduction**

Inter-personal relationship may be simply defined as that relationship that exists between two or more persons. It differs from a person's association, or relating, to impersonal objects. Types of inter-personal relationship range from intra-family relationship (by birth, marriage, etc) to friendship, romantic love-relationship, business relationship, etc. A study of inter-personal relationship can be approached from, at least, four angles:

1. **The Psychological Perspective.** It studies the dynamics and problem of relationships based on empirical case studies and psychological theories. In the past century studies in psychoanalysis, logotherapy, and other branches has greatly contributed in this direction.
2. **The Sociological Perspective.** It studies the social and cultural dynamics of inter-personal relationships with reference to social structure, stratification, culture, taboos, religion, civilization, and related social theories. Sociology usually combines with psychology as social psychology to study the individual in society. Also studied are personality disorders related to social malfunction as in criminology and socio-therapy.

3. **The Philosophical Perspective.** It deals with a rational analysis of the ultimate conditions, nature, scope, and object of inter-personal relationships and involves epistemological, metaphysical, aesthetical, and ethical considerations regarding the same. Inter-personal relationship has been an important subject of philosophical study that finds special reference in writings ranging from the Platonic dialogues to modern existentialist and postmodernist literature.
4. **The Theological Perspective.** Interpretation of texts plays an important role in forming a theological perspective. The process of interpretation interacts to help correct, modify, and refine previous perspectives.

This paper will be an intensely brief introduction to an understanding of inter-personal relationship from a theological perspective, namely the Biblical one.

## **Foundations**

The foundation of inter-personal relationship is the inter-personal relationship within the Community of the Holy Trinity. The doctrine of Trinity explicitly states that God is One but Triune in person: the Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Spirit is God, without admixture of natures, with all distinction of personalities, and yet One in essence and substance. God is an inter-personal Being. The Three Persons of the Godhead inter-relate through the Spirit of Love, which is the building block and logic of all relationship. The key Biblical passage underlining the connection between the inter-personal Trinity and inter-personal humanity is Genesis 1:26-27 where the Bible records:

Then God said, “Let **Us** make man in **Our** image, according to **Our** likeness; let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.” So God created man in His own image; in the image of God He created **him**; male and female He created **them**. (Gen 1:26-27, emphatics mine to show the relationship of plurality and unity in God and the creation of man).

The Triune God can be seen at work in deliberation and creation of man as a singular but social being. He created **him** as man; He created **them** as male and female; yet, both are man. The connecting concepts are “image of God” and “likeness of God”. Man is created as a singular, spiritual, and social being in the image and likeness of God who is One, Spirit, and Triune. The Triune comprehends the three persons of all relational possibilities: the “I”, the “You” or “Thou”, and the “He” or “She”. No inter-personal relationship can fall outside this triangle.

Also, gender is not the determiner of sociality; it is a function. The determiner is the essence of human existence; he is a plurality; the essence is the image of God stamped on the creation of man: as God is a person, man is also a person; as God is an inter-personal being, man is also an inter-personal being. Gender is not the essence of any; the distinction is not a necessary one, but only a functional one. Spiritually, and as in the resurrection, man is not distinguished as either a male or a female. However, gender is also not an accident; it is a function of primary ultimate relationality between two contingent persons. Such ultimacy and intimacy are

impossible between angels since they are not mutually derived nor related through the mutuality of that oneness, which is categorized in the words “come from” (as of Christ, John 13:3; 16:28) and “proceed from” (as of the Spirit, John 15:26) by the Bible. Similarly, the woman was made out of man and man is born of a woman. This image is, further, used in the Scripture to describe first God’s relationship with Israel and then, Christ’s relationship with the Church, which is known as the Bride and Body of Jesus Christ. The symbol of the primary derivative (that the woman was derived out of man) is used to explain the headship of man in the family and the Lordship of Christ over the Church (1Corinthians 11:8,9,12). Marriage and sexual purity, therefore, are key elements of the laws governing inter-personal relationships in the Bible.

Thirdly, the revelation of the relational dimensions of God to man perfects the idea of relationship between humans in relation to God. The Lord taught His disciples to pray addressing God as “Our Father”. Similarly, Christ calls us His brothers, His friends, and His disciples. These are sets and types of inter-personal relationships that are perfected in Christ. However, the gradation is important. The Royal Law teaches us to love God first with all our being and then our neighbors as ourselves. This doesn’t sabotage priority among “neighbors”. A believer is first expected to be faithful in his duties to his own family (wife, children, parents, brothers and sisters, etc) before anything else in the order of the second greatest commandment (see 1Timothy 3:4; 5:8; 1Peter 3:7).

That brings us to the building block of relationships, Love. The Bible doesn’t elaborate on love as some human emotion. Love is exclusively seen as the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians

5:22). The nature of godless man is lust; the expression of as Spirit-filled person is love. 1Corinthians 13 makes it very clear that without this, every form of religion is an empty exhibition only. God Himself is called Love and the Three persons of the Trinity are related through perfect love: the Father loves the Son, the Son loves the Father and says that no offence against the Holy Spirit will be forgiven, and the Spirit proceeds from the Father and testifies of the Son. This is the Spirit that must be the Person that unites man with God and God with man. This threefold cord cannot be easily broken (Ecclesiastes 4:12). See Galatians 5:22,23 for the nine facets of the Fruit of the Spirit.

### **Breach of Relationship**

The foundations cracked when man chose to disobey God (Genesis 3). This is known as the Fall of man. The Fall was a breach of relationship. Here man was severed from God and himself. The consequences of the Fall in Genesis 3, show us how Adam and Eve were not only ashamed and afraid of God, as a consequence but were also distrustful and accusative of each other. The Fall introduced shame, guilt, and culture. It introduced human civilization made in the image conceived of man. It is not a matter of coincidence that the first murderer built the first city on earth in the name of his son (Genesis 4:17). Obviously, sin is a transgression of the principle of love; for, love is the fulfillment of all law (1Timothy 1:5).

The Fall introduced lust as a function, motion, or process of sin in the human condition. Paul talks of this as “the motions of sin” and “another law in my members” that wars against the law of God and forces man into the slavery of sin from

which he can't deliver himself (Romans 7:5, 23). Sin distorts reality and all relationships; in fact, it makes authentic relationships impossible because of the introvert selfishness that is essential to it. The other person and even God are perceived as mere objects through the eyes of sin; they are turned into objects and the self aggrandized or falsely debased to such an extent that purity of love becomes impossible. Modern social movements like subcultures and postmodernism must not be looked at as the problem. The problem is an ancient one and serves as the root of all the kinds of sins that are visible in present society, all the problems in relationships, all distortive symbolizations of love and exhibitionism of lust as seen throughout the history of human culture and civilization. The problem is sin at war in the individual's members. The works of flesh listed in Galatians 5:19-21 may be classified as (1) Sexual aberrations – adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lewdness; (2) Spiritual aberrations – idolatry, sorcery; (3) Social aberrations – hatred, jealousies, outbursts of wrath; (4) Goal or Career aberrations – selfish ambitions, dissensions, heresies, envy, murders (which is rivalry and obliteration of rivalry); and what may be called (5) Mental aberrations – drunkenness, revelries and the like. Modern psychologists use terms like “limerance”, “co-dependency”, and “relational aggression” to identify such disorders in inter-personal relationships.

The reduction of inter-personal relationships from “I-Thou” to “I-It” (cf. Martin Buber) marks the end of pure and personal relationship. The problem, however is severe when each of the members mutually treat each other as “It”, a means to use to obtain some desired “It” – money, sensual gratification, etc. The result is increased dissatisfaction and

increased aberration; so that the final condition is not an “I-It” but an “It-It” situation. Idolatry is one example where God is stultified into an object of use, and the Bible says that they that invent such religion become like it (an “It-It” situation, Psalm 115:8). The feelings of religiosity may exist but the object of worship is impersonified. Similarly, in adultery and all other aberration, impersonalization and dehumanization are severe, despite the presence of the feelings of fidelity within the aberrations of relationships. Self-deception is acute. Social psychologists such as Philip Zimbardo of Stanford University had proven how dehumanization plays key role in dismantling the power of the conscience and gradually converting persons into devils, what he calls the “Lucifer effect”. The “It-It” situation is where the individual lives in a false and godless world created by the demands of increased sinfulness. This world detaches the individual from reality and allows the rationality of a sinful lifestyle. The Bible calls this the suppression of truth through unrighteousness (Rom.1:18). It is only through the emancipation of the Spirit that sin is rendered inoperative and the members of the body are freed to serve the Spirit of love (Rom.6).

### **Development of Inter-personal Relationships: Biblical Case Study**

The stages of the development and deterioration of inter-personal relationships may be outlined as follows:

- 1. Recognition:** Propinquity. Proximity, similar beliefs, tastes, etc help in drawing persons to each other. Within families, the recognition develops through proximity and communication to give the shape of the type of relationship.

**2. Communication.** Communication deepens understanding of person since inter-personal relationship is spiritual, moral, intellectual, and emotional. Trust and faith builds here.

**3. Love.** Affection develops and binds the relationship. Love differs from infatuation, sexual attraction, and such misrepresentations in literature and movies. Psychologists distinguish true inter-personal love relationship from limerance, self-seeking lust, sadism, and philiac disorders.

**1. Selfishness.** The intrusion of selfishness is the end of the love-relationship, where the object of love begins to turn into an object of use. This creates frustration, dehumanization, disrespect, hurt, and, finally, exclusion. A love-relationship, on the other hand, is built on trust, faith, and self-giving.

**2. Alienation.** Alienation occurs where communication becomes rare or non-existent. The either of or both of the parties communicates less, giving rise to more suspicions, misunderstandings, and, finally, indifference or contempt.

**3. Condemnation, Termination, and Betrayal.** The final condition involves relational aggression leading to condemnation, demeaning, and a termination of the relationship. Betrayal involves, among other things, the giving out of personal information.

The first three steps lead to inter-personal relationships; the last three steps lead away from inter-personal relationships. The development may be illustrated through the following case:

### ***Adam and Eve***

In Genesis 2, the Lord brings Eve to Adam and he recognizes her in the following words “This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called woman because she



was taken out of man” (v.23). Prior to this, the Lord had brought the various beasts of the field and birds of the air to him and Adam gave them names. But, it was only when Eve was brought to him that he recognized in her the propinquity that possibilized inter-personal relationship with her. This is also the first instance of communication and expression regarding another human person by a human. The Bible doesn’t record details of communications between the both, except it that it speaks about this relationship as a pattern for all marital ones: “Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and they shall become one flesh” (v.24). The intimacy and ultimacy of love is also reflected in the words “And they were both naked, the man and his wife, and were not ashamed” (v.25), in other words, there was no ego-centric feeling of distancing, alienation, and concealment.

After the Fall, however, selfishness leads to alienation (covering) and, later, an accusative behavior. However, there is healing through the Edenic Covenant in which God not only pronounces curse upon the serpent and the ground but also makes a way in which humans could relate to each other contingently.

Other cases like Isaac and Rebekah, Joseph and his brothers, David and Jonathan, Jesus and Judas Iscariot, Paul and Timothy may be studied in this line.

### **1 Corinthians 13**

This chapter comes after Paul’s explanation of inter-relational relationships within the Body of Christ in chapter 12. It must be understood that the Church is the

representation of the Community that God desires humans to be. Some important points to note from chapter 12 are:

1. The unity of the Body is maintained through the relationship with the Head who is Christ through the supply of the Holy Spirit. There is One Body, One Faith, and One Spirit, though we are many (1Cor.12:1-13). Any other reason that brings division is not of God (see James 3:14-16).
2. Each member has a distinct identity, individuality, and role that can neither be denied nor be compromised. For instance, the foot cannot function as the eye (vv.14-19).
3. None of the members are to be regarded as dispensable in the inter-relationship. One of the most detrimental and damaging words that people use is “I don’t care about so and so” or “I have no need of you”. Paul says “the eye cannot say to the hand, “I have no need of you”; nor again the head to the feet, “I have no need of you.” (vv.20-22)
4. God has placed each person in his particular role; therefore, no body is more preferable or important than any other (vv.23-24). However, this doesn’t mean that we do not choose our friendships. Jesus also had an inner circle composed of Peter, James, and John. But, it certainly means that we do not despise the others.
5. We need to have the same care for one another, without partiality of any kind (v.25).
6. If one suffers, all suffer with it; if one is honored, all rejoice with it (v.26). This is an important principle, which is natural to the human body. The aberrational tendency is to blame the one who is suffering. We

share each others mistakes and rejoice with the one who succeeds (note: it doesn't say, share the honor or merit, but share in the rejoicing). Such is the attitude of a healthy person in Christ.

7. Every one must strive for excellence for the benefit of the Body (vv.27-31).

Then, Paul goes on to talk about the essence that pours substance into this relationship. Why does all this matter? It's because of the love of Christ within us. We'll ponder on the characteristics of love listed in chapter 13 from verses 4-8:

Love suffers long and is kind; love does not envy; love does not parade itself, is not puffed up; does not behave rudely, does not seek its own, is not provoked, thinks no evil; does not rejoice in iniquity, but rejoices in the truth; bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never fails. (1Co 13:4-8)

*Love suffers long.* Nothing is more elastic than love. The greatest tension cannot break true love. It doesn't say "How many times shall I forgive my brother, seven times?" It goes on forgiving and the fountain of forgiveness never ends.

*Love is kind.* Love doesn't have the capacity to hurt or wrong someone. On the other hand, it is kind in speech and action.

*Love does not envy.* Love doesn't compete with people nor envy them when they are successful. It doesn't speak evil of anyone nor tries to destroy someone through humiliating them, slandering them, and gossiping against them.

*Love does not parade itself.* A person who has a healthy relationship doesn't feel the need to show or demand his importance. He doesn't feel the need that people should

notice him and praise him. It also knows the importance of privacy and modesty, and doesn't talk much about itself to others.

*Love is not puffed up.* No one can flatter this person for he has no ego to be puffed up. The center is shifted within Christ. Jesus is all he seeks and wishes to glorify. He is saddened when people try to elate him. Like Paul and Barnabas, he'll cry out "We also are men with the same nature as you, and preach to you that you should turn from these useless things to the living God, who made the heaven, the earth, the sea, and all things that are in them" (Acts 14:15).

*Love does not behave rudely.* Love doesn't treat someone as inhuman, unimportant, or contemptible. A healthy person knows that every person bears the stamp of the likeness of God and we're all derived from the same root.

*Love does not seek its own.* This is the crux of Christian non-violence and charity. A Christian will not fight for his own rights or demand that his rights and honors be given to him. The Christian will not return hurt for personal hurt, nor will he work in any manner for personal benefit alone. The Christian functions as a role in the Body of Christ for the edification of the Body.

*Love is not provoked.* Love doesn't react to situations. Love acts upon the situation. The situations do not control love; but love controls its responses. The one controlled by the flesh reacts out of the flesh; the one controlled by the Spirit responds from the Spirit.

*Love thinks no evil.* Love is the opposite of evil, since love is the sum and fulfillment of God's law.

*Love does not rejoice at iniquity.* Love cannot enjoy any literature, joke, movie, or game that contains vulgarity, profanity, and blasphemy.

*Love rejoices in the truth.* This shows the connection between love and truth. The test of truth is whether love can rejoice in it. It is the opposite of malice, hypocrisy, craft, and falsehood.

*Love bears all things.* Love doesn't say "I can tolerate this, but I can't tolerate that". It doesn't recoil into intolerance in certain situations. It neither complains nor gives up. This is balanced with the integrity of character that it holds and doesn't compromise with evil, but stands against falsehood as the witness of Christ.

*Love believes all things.* Trust and faith are built into love. It has no place for false speculations, suspicions, and doubts.

*Love hopes all things.* The expectation of love is positive, because this love is of God. It is anxiety-free and fearless of the future. It doesn't treat someone as incorrigible and hopeless. It has patience with people.

*Love endures all things.* Love is always ready to suffer loss. It is not attached to the comforts and cares of this world. Therefore, unlike the seed that falls among thorns and thickets, love grows straight, strong, and bears fruit in its due season.

*Love never fails.* It has no ending point. It continues forever.

## **Conclusion**

In John 17, Jesus prays to the Father in His priestly prayer saying "Holy Father, keep through Your name those whom You have given Me, that they may be one as We are" (v.11). In other words, He wished us to be related to each other in the same manner that He is related to the Father through the Spirit in the Holy Trinity. Divisions, alienations, and breaches occur when we fail to keep the Spirit of love. We cannot, certainly, have the same level of relationships with

everyone; even as we have seen that Jesus also had His inner circle of friends, then the other disciples, and then the seventy, and then others. Similarly, our relationships must catch hold of priorities, remembering the fact “whom You have given Me”. Your family is given to you and not to others, so your relationship, role, and responsibility within the family is a special one. The elders at Ephesus were asked to “take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers” (Acts 20:28). This applies to all other relationships. Remember, Jesus chose the twelve after a whole night of prayer. We cannot be less careful in choosing our relationships. The Bible also talks about the leaven that can leaven the whole lump in 1Corinthians 5 and commands certain kind of people to be kept off from fellowship (also see 2John 10). Overall, the Spirit of love is the guiding light that directs the way every member must function and relate in the Body of Christ.

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